

Do not privatize the Bonneville Power Administration

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To Pacific Northwesterners, the Bonneville Power Administration power grid is like energy itself — quietly taken for granted, humming away in the background ... until something goes wrong.

A proposal by the Trump administration to sell off BPA's transmission system should shake the region awake from complacency. In his budget proposal released last week, Trump proposes raising \$1.8 billion for the short-term, and \$4.9 billion over the decade, by “divestiture of Bonneville’s transmission assets,” according to a short explanation in the Energy Department budget.

Bonneville operates the power backbone for the region — transmitting the clean, cheap electricity generated by Columbia River dams across 15,000 miles of lines from the Pacific Northwest and into California. It has about three-quarters of the high-voltage power lines for a region with 12.5 million people.

Because it is a public entity, it does not require the rapacious profit margin that would inevitably flow from Trump’s wrongheaded privatization proposal. It is self-sustaining, dependent on energy sales and ratepayers for its budget. It does not depend on any federal appropriation. And it underpins an economy with industries that located here because of the lower cost power.

Let’s be clear: there are many lousy ideas in Trump’s budget proposal, but as with most presidential budgets, it is dead on arrival in Congress.

However, the proposal to privatize BPA’s transmission grid deserves to be taken more seriously because it has come up — again and again. The libertarian Cato Institute wrote a whole white paper on it in the 1980s, and Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden held up a President George W. Bush appointment to block the same idea in 2005.

Wyden seems primed for a fight again. “Public power customers in the Pacific Northwest have paid for the system and their investment should not be put up for sale,” he said in a news release.

Bonneville was created as a federal infrastructure project in 1937 to light the Northwest with hydroelectric power from Grand Coulee and other dams. But it has repaid all treasury loans over the decades, on time and at market-rate interest and is fully self-supporting.

It has a mandate to first supply public utilities like Seattle City Light and also supplies private utilities like Puget Sound Energy and Portland General Electric. It maintains and builds out its transmission network with the power sales.

Bonneville has some challenges and critics. The state of Montana, as well as environmental groups, want Bonneville to end a special transmission tariff in the Big Sky State because the tariff creates an impediment to new wind power projects.

But those types of critiques underscore the need to have locally accountable transmission management — not one run by a private power conglomerate.

If President Donald Trump gets his way, goodbye cheap public power, hello Wall Street power overlords. The Pacific Northwest members of Congress of both parties should unite and flip the off switch on this terrible idea.